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## CHAPTER 9

### Playwork

#### FRASER BROWN

[Insert Chapter Image here]

The opposite of play – if redefined in terms which stress its reinforcing optimism and excitement – is not work, it is depression. Players come out of their **ludic paradoxes** . . . with renewed belief in the worthwhileness of merely living.

(Sutton-Smith, 1999, p. 254)

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#### Ludic paradox

Ludic refers to play, and a paradox is a strange contradiction that might not be expected, but nevertheless exists, so ‘ludic paradox’ refers to a complex contradiction relating to play behaviour.

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#### Introduction

Although it is possible to identify supervised out-of-school provision for play towards the end of the nineteenth century (Cranwell, 2003), most commentators would accept that the seeds of the modern-day playwork profession were planted soon after the Second World War. In the 1950s and 1960s, largely in response to the ideas of Sorensen (a Danish architect), several adventure playgrounds appeared in the United Kingdom. Sorensen envisaged ‘junk’ playgrounds, where children could imagine, shape and create their own reality. In *Planning for Play* (1968, p. 55) Lady Allen of Hurtwood quotes correspondence between herself and Sorensen from 1947, which provides some clues to his thinking:

The object must be to give the children of the city a substitute for the rich possibilities for play which children in the country possess . . . It is opportune to warn against too much supervision . . . children ought to be free and by themselves to the greatest possible extent . . . one ought to be exceedingly careful when interfering in the lives and activities of children.

These ideas shaped the thinking of many of the early playwork pioneers (Abernethy, 1968; Benjamin, 1974; Hughes, 1975). In this short quote it is possible to identify the early germ of ideas now taken for granted by the playwork profession: children being in control of their own play places (Hughes, 1996); the dangers of adulteration (Sturrock and Else, 1998); the value of providing enriched play environments (Brown, 2003a). The last 10 years have seen both a consolidation of that early thinking and the development of a number of new ideas, with the result that modern playwork practice is now informed by a substantial body of underpinning theory (Brown and Taylor, 2008; Hughes, 2012; Brown, 2014; Kilvington and Wood 2018; Brown and Hughes, 2018). Having dealt with most of the classical playwork theories in Chapter 1, by the end of this chapter you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What do more recent theories of playwork and the ideas of Brian Sutton-Smith tell us

- about the nature and purpose of playwork?
- What are the implications for playwork practice?

### Ambiguity and beyond

Sutton-Smith's classic text *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) contains the most comprehensive examination of play theory that has yet been attempted. Sutton-Smith identifies over 100 theories, which he groups under generic headings (rhetorics). Some are respected; others ridiculous. They have one thing in common: they all fall short of providing a full explanation of play. Via an exhilarating sweep of humour, research, children's folklore and cutting-edge theory, he reaches the conclusion that trying to define play is virtually impossible. A definition of play would have to be extremely wide ranging. It would have to apply to animals as well as humans, to adults as well as children, and could not be restricted to the values of Western civilisation. It would have to cover all manner of participant forms, from daydreaming and jokes to sports and festivals. He says: 'Play is like language: a system of communication and expression, not in itself either good or bad' (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 219). He expresses concern about the modern Western tendency to idealise play, which he says leads us to accept untenable definitions – for example that play is intrinsically positive, voluntary and free. He then goes on to introduce a new approach, suggesting that play has evolutionary impact, because it is the means by which human beings adapt to all aspects of historical change. Play is characterised by the '**potentiation of adaptive variability**' (1997, p. 231). Sutton-Smith suggests that play activity stimulates the brain in such a way that brain cells retain their 'plasticity'. In other words, the very act of playing enables us to retain, and even develop, our flexibility of thought. This clearly has substantial impact on both **individual development and species 'evolution'**.

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#### Potentiation of adaptive variability

A potential for a player to carry out/practise varied behaviours that will help him/her adapt to life beyond the play situation.

#### Individual development and species 'evolution'

Play creates situations that do not simply help the individual to develop skills, but help whole groups of players to develop skills that they can then teach other people, which in turn helps the whole human race to progress.

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### IDEAS IN ACTION



#### Practitioner observation

The following sequence took place in an early years setting, and illustrates many of the preceding points – especially the paradoxical nature of play, the role of free-flowing play, the complexity of play, and the duality of the experience. (I am grateful to Katherine Press for permission to use this story.)

It is snack time, and picking up on the relaxed atmosphere, I lie on the floor in the middle of

the children while they have their snacks.

Gerry: 'Look – Katherine has fallen asleep!'

I open one eye and look at Gerry.

He laughs and runs back to his seat.

Martin: 'That's not Katherine – it's a troll.'

I then start to snore: zzzzzzz . . . .

The children laugh, and start to get excited.

Two children come over with their apples, and put them on my tummy.

As I move to get the apples, the children run back to their seats.

I pretend to eat the apples, but sit up and start to sniff.

'I think there must be children moving around! I can smell children when they move close to me! Yum yum!'

They all scream and run back to their seats.

Lisa creeps into the home corner.

'Let's get some pretend food for the troll.'

She puts the food on a plate and pushes it towards me.

I sniff again . . . 'Oh yuck, that's not my food. My food's children.'

Lisa laughs.

Then Jodie gets a teddy from the cuddly toy box.

She creeps up to me with the toy and puts it by my head.

'Here you go Mr Troll; I got you a teddy.'

She sits back.

I slowly start to stroke the teddy.

I start to smile and cuddle the teddy bear.

I sit up slowly, and cuddling the teddy I walk out of the classroom.

I come back in as Katherine.

‘Hello everyone. I just saw a really funny troll holding a teddy. Did you?’

The children start to tell me about their adventure with the troll, and how he could smell them and wanted to eat them if they moved! Not one single child said that the troll was me.

## COMMENT

This short story illustrates not only the power of play but also the potential impact of a sensitive playworker. To begin with, the playworker relaxes with the children, and is not at all intrusive into their experience. However, she is imaginative enough to respond to the children’s cues; going with the flow of their play. The playworker is clearly not a troll, and would not eat the children. All the children know that, and yet none of them breaks out of the fantasy. Presumably they feel safe with their playworker in the dangerous world of trolls. One of the children appears intuitively to understand the power of **transitional objects** (Winnicott, 1974), and teddy bears in particular – so much so that she is able to take the heat out of the situation with her peace offering to the troll. Perhaps the most remarkable thing is the final duality: the discussion about the troll with the very person who was pretending to be the troll. These are quite small children, and yet they are clearly able to separate the complex and powerful imagery of their play experience from the subsequent discussion about that experience.

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### Transitional object

A transitional object is created in a child’s belief that one object can ‘stand for’ something else in the sense of a fantasy experience.

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In his most recent work, ‘Beyond ambiguity’ (2008), Sutton-Smith reveals that in recent years he has become more and more interested in both the paradox and the duality of play. Play is paradoxical because it is not always what it seems: for example, a fight is sometimes not a fight, but simply rough and tumble play. The ‘duality’ refers specifically to a link that he has identified between the primary emotions identified by Damasio (1994) – shock, fear, anger, sadness, happiness and disgust – and certain fundamental aspects of play. Thus:

shock is ever-present in games of teasing and hazing; fear is the key in risk taking; anger dominates all forms of contest; loneliness accounts for festivals of all shapes and sizes, happiness is the best label for our modern consumer play subjectivities known as **peak experiences**, and disgust fits all forms of nonsense and profanity.

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### Peak experience

An experience in which the individual feels intense joy and sense of purpose.

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He has now taken this one stage further, and suggests that within these different forms of play performance there is always also a duality, and that there are elements in our informal play behaviour that may be seen to prepare us for the trials and tribulations of real life. Thus:

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➔ Jarvis, in Chapter 7, takes an in-depth look at rough and tumble play.

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- Teasing involves harassment, which, when met with player resilience, may be seen to prepare us for initiation procedures in later life.
- Risks involve dangers being confronted with courage, which prepares us for the chances we take with our physical and economic fate.
- Contests involve attacks rebutted by vigilance and defence, which in many ways can be seen to prepare us for combat, war and predation.
- Festivals involve loneliness, sometimes confronted with inebriation, which helps to develop the coping mechanisms for when we are confronted with the absence of membership identity.
- Flow experiences describe narcissisms met by fame, which prepares us for the central role of **individualistic consumer subjectivity** in modern life.

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### **Individualistic consumer subjectivity**

The excessive amount of choice created by a modern consumer society means that people constantly have to choose between which items to buy, such as clothes, food, furnishings, in a subjective fashion on the basis of trivial factors: hence consumption becomes highly subjective and individualistic.

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- And finally, profanities involve deviance rebutted by wit, which prepares us to be rebellious **iconoclasts**.

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### **Iconoclast**

One who destroys culturally important symbols and monuments. In the sense that this chapter uses the term, it is suggesting that play might enable a player to experiment with ideas that are unconventional in his/her culture.

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All this leads Sutton-Smith to the conclusion that play has evolved as the mechanism that enables human beings to cope with a rapidly changing world. Our biological genetic make-up is generally unable to keep pace with our rapidly changing social world, but the presence of a **‘play gene’** enables us to overcome the problem.

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### **Play gene**

A concept proposing that the desire to play is encoded in human beings’ biology. The reference to ‘a gene’ is a figure of speech, as what we know of genetics indicates that the need for play would be the result of complex interactions between many genes.

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## **The concept of risk in play and playwork**

In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* dated 10 September 2007, headed ‘Let our children play’, concern was expressed about the ‘marked decline over the past 15 years in children’s play’. The letter was notable for the fact that it was signed by 270 senior figures from a wide range of professional backgrounds. The authors highlighted a wide range of features of modern life

that have eroded children's play, including a 'pervasive cultural anxiety which, when uncontained by the policymaking process, routinely contaminates the space needed for authentic play to flourish'.

This is a theme reflected in Tim Gill's *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society* (2007). Gill draws attention to developments that have taken place in UK society during the last 25 years that have had a negative impact on children's play, and especially on children's opportunities to experience risk. These include: greater amounts of traffic on the roads; increased regulatory frameworks; media scare stories about paedophiles; an increasing obsession with academic attainment; and a growing fear of litigation on the part of professionals who work with children. The result is that children are far less visible in our local communities than they once were. This is potentially dangerous, because, as Chilton (2018) suggests, children need to experience all aspects of their local environment in order to understand the community in which they live. Nor will it be easy for the community to accept them as having a legitimate presence if they are rarely seen. It is also dangerous in the longer term, because it means children will have far fewer opportunities to take risks.

Gill (2007, p. 16) summarises the case for enabling children to engage with risk as being fourfold:

- Encounters with certain types of risk help children learn how to manage those risks.
- If the child's appetite for risk taking is not satisfied, s/he may seek out situations that carry even greater risks.
- Undertaking risky activities carries beneficial side-effects for children's health and development.
- Overcoming challenging situations is an essential part of living a meaningful and satisfying life.

The problem exposed by Ball (2011) is that the positive outcomes from play are hard to measure, whereas the negative outcomes – accidents, costs, litigation – can be measured by science and other qualitative tools, and are all too real. Faced with this situation, and children's lack of political muscle, the tendency will be for benefits to be undervalued and play provision to lose out.

However, the letter to the *Daily Telegraph* is an indication of a growing understanding that things have gone too far, and that we need to redress the balance. This is something that playworkers have been saying for many years. Hughes (2001) has suggested that playwork is essentially evolutionary in nature, and that risk and challenge are at the very heart of what the profession is all about. For him, the child's opportunity to experience risk should be seen as part of the right to play, which is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). Hence Hughes (2001, p. 10) sees this element of the work as compensatory in nature. The role of playwork is to offer children environments and experiences that, while 'providing challenge, do not expose children to unknown dangers, fears or feelings of failure'.

The key to this approach is the need to differentiate between risk (which is assessable) and hazard (which is unpredictable). Gladwin (2005) says that risk assessment requires two separate judgements: first, what is the potential for something to happen; and, second, what are the likely consequences if it does? Evolutionary playwork accepts that children are capable of their own risk assessment. Furthermore, it is the human being's inclination to take risks that sets us apart, and makes us the dominant species on the planet.



## IDEAS IN ACTION



### Author's observational notes

Once, when my wife was away in France, I collected my 5-year-old grandson from school. As a special treat we went to Rowntrees Park, where there is a variety of brightly coloured adventurous play equipment. He went straight to the top of the 'spider's web' (about 10 metres off the ground). Admiring his agility, I sent a text message to my wife telling her of our grandson's feat. Almost immediately I received a reply saying, 'Are you mad? Get him down!' In an instant my whole perspective on the situation changed, and I began to encourage him to come down. He was halfway down when a girl, at least three years his senior, passed him on the way up. Of course, he turned round and followed the girl back to the top. When she reached the top, the girl leaned through the ropes, grabbed the central pole, and slid down to the ground. My grandson started to copy what he had seen (and I started to panic). Reaching through the ropes he placed his hands on the central pole, but on surveying the scene he pulled back and climbed back down the net (much to my relief).

### COMMENT

The lesson from this story is that, even at the age of 5, my grandson was perfectly capable of his own risk assessment. He was able to judge what he could and could not manage. The irony is that if he had not been out of my reach I would have intervened. Such intervention would have had purely personal motives, and would not really have been in the best interests of the child. In the words of Bob Hughes (2012, p. 112):

The great majority of children are neither stupid, nor suicidal. They will not deliberately go far beyond the limits of their known skills. But to develop at all, they need to take some of what they do beyond its previous limit, simply to see if they can. When we see a child engaged in something 'dangerous', we are making that judgement from our standpoint, not from theirs.

### STOP AND REFLECT

*Are there moments in your own practice where you have intervened in (what you consider to be) a potentially dangerous situation, when you could have let events unfold? To what extent do you agree that our assessment of what is 'dangerous' is indeed a judgement from our standpoint, not theirs?*

## The theory of loose parts

Bengtsson (1974) speaks of play as taking place wherever 'something turns up to move the imagination'. This can be anything, 'but preferably something that can be manipulated and influenced' (1974, p. 49). It also reflects the optimistic view of creativity touched on by Nicholson and Schreiner (1973) when they suggest that children should be empowered to structure their own play environment, because human beings are inherently creative, and there is no reason to believe we lose that talent as we grow older. This view is supported by



Hart's (1995) observation that children are only excited about playgrounds when they are being built. He suggested there was a link between their interest and the availability of 'materials for them to work with' (Hart, 1995, p. 21). Why should that be? We know already that play is more about process than product. Nicholson (1971), in developing his 'theory of loose parts', explains it thus: 'In any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it' (p. 30).

Nicholson is using the word 'environment' in the holistic sense: 'a system of interactive parts that affect us' (Nicholson and Schreiner, 1973, p. 19). Thus a loose-part environment includes everything, from the perimeter walls of a building to the flotsam and jetsam that lie within. He suggests that the beach is a good example of a loose-parts environment. Here the sand is constantly shifting; the sea is fluid; even the rock pools change with the tides. The debris of past holidaymakers is left on the beach for future children to play with. Thus the form and structure of a loose parts environment are the result of 'community generated forms' (1973, p. 20). However, Nicholson is not of the opinion that this is an entirely random process. Instead he describes a loose-parts environment as having 'the form of highly ordered disorder – where every part has its place' (1973, p. 20). The value and popularity of loose-parts environments is confirmed throughout the literature. Norén-Björn says that 'loose materials are of crucial significance in enriching play' (1982, p. 166). Numerous researchers have shown that children prefer sandpits and paddling pools to most other items of equipment (Blakely and Hart, 1987). Moore (1974) found that this was especially true of the under-5s. Berry (1993, p. 129) stated that dramatic play is stimulated by the introduction of loose parts, and that the 'amount of time spent increased considerably when loose parts were added'. Parkinson (1987) even suggested that loose parts are one of the factors governing the extent of a child's play range.

Nevertheless, it is important not to give the impression that loose materials are all that is needed to stimulate children's play. Chiang (1985) found that whereas 'portable' materials are used during group dramatic and group constructive play, fixed equipment comes to the fore with group functional play. Nicholson (1971) himself makes the point that a loose-parts environment is a holistic concept, which includes the solid structures such as walls and fences as well as the creative materials within. He would not suggest that climbing frames should be demolished, but it should be possible to combine them with loose resources in order to facilitate creative possibilities.

## IDEAS IN ACTION



### Loose parts stimulate the imagination

The book *The Venture: A Case Study of an Adventure Playground* (Brown, 2007, pp. 40–2) contains an excellent example of the way in which loose parts can stimulate the imaginations of children who might otherwise not be expected to be creative. Ex-playworker Ben Tawil recounts a tale about a lorryload of old furniture that was dumped at the entrance to the adventure playground. In his (slightly abridged) words:

As the children arrived for the evening session they took immediate interest in the furniture. A group of about seven children, aged eight to twelve, both boys and girls, started to sift through it. At first their search seemed indiscriminate, almost chaotic, with very little communication between them . . . the children seemed to have concurrent ideas that stemmed

from one person's initial placing down of a piece of furniture. Two leaders emerged – the eldest girl of about twelve, and one of the younger boys of about eight. They seemed to be taking on the role of interior designers – telling the rest of the group where to position the furniture. These instructions were followed to the letter with great seriousness. Together they created a home environment . . .

Straight away a boy of about eleven sat down at the bureau and exclaimed, 'Can you keep the noise down? I'm trying to write a letter to the council,' and without question or hesitation the oldest girl (until this point the chief interior designer) addressed the other children in a sharp authoritarian voice, 'Your Dad's told you to keep the noise down. Now go and play quietly.' Immediately the rest of the group took on roles as brothers and sisters, grandparents, daughter and visiting boyfriend . . .

This play . . . continued for *two weeks* – every evening and for full eight-hour days at the weekend. Different groups of children used the materials and altered the environment and the narrative to suit their needs . . . Eventually the children's interest waned: perhaps they had played out their need for this type of play for the time being, they had certainly worn out the already dilapidated furniture. The play began to morph once more as the children found uses for panels from the furniture in construction play, and the remnants were put to good use fuelling our nightly campfire.

## COMMENT

Tawil says:

The value of this wagon load of tatty cast-offs was immeasurable . . . the new materials available that evening stimulated an evolving idea that the children controlled – they had complete ownership of their play, and it was developed naturally without the need for me to intervene or entertain or provide diversion.

At one point he alludes to the idea that the children were engaged not just in dramatic play, but rather in sociodramatic play (Smilansky, 1968). They could clearly be seen to be acting out roles of importance to their everyday lives. There was an easy mix of ages and genders, with children 'showing compassion, consideration, encouragement, and support – experiencing sympathy and empathy' (Brown and Webb, 2005). He also speaks of how the narrative appeared to take on a life of its own, 'unhindered by the intermittent comings and goings of players'.

Taylor (2008) suggests that the theory of loose parts has relevance in several areas of playwork theory and practice, including play types (Hughes, 2006), compound flexibility (Brown, 2003a), transitional phenomena (Winnicott, 1951), values and assumptions (SkillsActive, 2002), playwork principles (PPSG, 2005), and quality assurance (Conway and Farley, 2001).

## STOP AND REFLECT

*How could you explore the theory of loose parts in your setting?*

## The play cycle and the play stage

In their excellent conference paper 'The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healing', Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else (1998) put forward a strong argument for playworkers to be regarded as potential healers.

They argue that playwork has so far failed to flourish because of a lack of theoretical

clarity, political naivety, conflicting claims on scarce resources, and a lack of in-house research. As a consequence, the last 30 years have seen a reduction in open access playwork provision.

Sturrock and Else focus on the study of the mind or psyche at play, and to describe this they have coined the term **psycholudics**. Their thesis rests on the proposition that ‘prior to each act of creativity . . . lies an imaginal realm or zone that is playful (*ludic*) and symbolically constituted. The playworker joins and works with this *emergent material* and content.’ Thus, they argue, playwork is not about control or management; rather, its value rests in the richness of response that a play exchange, setting or artefact generates (1998, pp. 4–5). For Sturrock and Else, playwork takes place on two levels: first, the obvious level of playing; and, second, at a deeper layer of unconscious – but emerging – content. They reject the commonly held view that sees play as indefinable. Instead they suggest that the purpose of play is to act as a prefiguring element to creativity, which might be seen as the source of all mental health. Therein lies a means of healing trauma, neurosis and psychic ill (through play).

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### Psycholudics

The study of the mind at play: from psyche (of the mind) and ludic (relating to play).

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Like Bateson (1955), they suggest that the play drive takes place in a *frame*, and that players issue signals that are contained and reflected back to the player. They use Sutton-Smith’s (1984) concept of the *play cue* to describe these signals. They introduce the concept of a *play cycle*, which in an ideal world satisfies the child’s immediate desire to play, and which holds the meaning of that play. Sturrock and Else focus on the idea that playworkers are in a unique position to respond to the child’s play cues, and they highlight the importance of ensuring that those responses are appropriate. From these interactive experiences playworkers may be able to ‘develop insights and interpretative responses, aiding further, and perhaps deepening, expressions of this *ludic content*’ (1998, p. 5).

However, this occurs only in the ideal play cycle. Sometimes that ideal process breaks down. Sturrock and Else call this *dys-play*, and suggest that it might occur in four distinct circumstances, where:

- 1 the meaning of play goes unrecognised;
- 2 the adult’s response is inappropriate;
- 3 the containment breaks;
- 4 the cycle becomes hybrid.

In the last case, especially, they feel the child is likely to start forming neuroses. This is crucial to their thesis. Many well-established therapies involve the replaying of neuroses formed in childhood. Thus Sturrock and Else are suggesting that playworkers are in a potentially important position, because they are ‘active at the precise point where potential neuroses are being formed’ (1998, p. 5). They therefore ask whether playwork might be seen as either curative or at least cathartic, and suggest that playworkers might be seen as *freely associating in the free associations* of children.



### Author's observational notes

I once watched a playworker playing with a 10-yearold boy called Nicolae, in a hospital ward. They were engaged in a game of chase. Nicolae was chasing the playworker, but seemed to want her to chase him. As they were running round the cots, Nicolae stopped at a table and banged it noisily twice with his hand. The playworker kept on running, having missed the play cue she had just been given. Nicolae resumed his chase. Next, he knocked over a mattress, and clasped his hands to his face in mock horror. He even said, 'Oh dear!' This was a much more obvious play cue, and yet the playworker missed it altogether, and continued to run away from him. That left Nicolae with no option but to take his cue from the playworker, and so he started to chase her again. Almost immediately he ran past the playworker's coat, which was hanging from a door handle. He stopped and put his hand into the coat pocket, pretending to steal something. At last the playworker got the message, and started to chase him. Nicolae yelled excitedly. He allowed himself to be caught quite quickly, and the pair ended up rolling around on the floor, with Nicolae giggling triumphantly.

### COMMENT

The unstated meaning of the play cues in this example is fairly clear: 'Stop running away, and start chasing me.' When the playworker eventually responded, Nicolae's reaction was not simply to start running away. His excited yell showed a real sense of accomplishment, and the fact that he allowed himself to be caught seemed to reflect a desire to confirm his achievement.

Sturrock and Else (1998) emphasise the importance of the playworker's ability to interpret children's play cues. They suggest that a consistent failure to do so may have damaging effects for the children concerned. Play cues are often quite subtle, which means that playworkers have to be highly sophisticated in their ability to interpret the meaning of each child's behaviour. However, it is fortunate that one of the functions of play is to provide us with the opportunity to engage with the non-verbal messages of other human beings. Through play we develop those interpretative skills (Brown, 2008). Therefore, so long as the playworker has had a reasonably well-balanced childhood, there should be no problem interpreting children's play cues.

It is also significant that Nicolae had been born 10 weeks premature, and weighing less than 2 pounds. He was abandoned at birth, and subsequently spent most of his life tied in a cot. He had considerable brain damage, although it was not clear whether this was the result of his genetic make-up or his life experience – probably a combination of the two. At the time of my observation, Nicolae had only been free of his abuse for about nine months. In that time he had learned to walk, had developed some rudimentary language, and was now engaged in social play. His use of quite sophisticated play cues was a further indication of his development through play.

### STOP AND REFLECT

*How successful are you at interpreting children's play cues? Can you identify examples from your own experience where you have misread the non-verbal messages of your children? What was your reaction? And theirs? What did you learn from this situation?*

Thus, for Sturrock and Else, play is a drive active in a *frame* of a particular nature. The frame is the setting for the child's driven material – his/her cues and themes. The play drive

requires accommodation and/or return. Some elements of the playwork setting will inevitably be compensatory for, and contribute to, the child's emotional equilibrium. At the deeper levels of functioning, children express, in symbolic form, unconscious material crucial to their psychic development. This requires containment, reflection, return, and thoughtful engagement by the playworker; all of which means that playworkers must develop a consistent interpretative or analytic perspective out of which to issue their responses.

### The BRAWGS continuum and the edge of recalcitrance

Frost and Woods (2006, p. 338) describe playworkers as 'adults who support and help children play through providing resources, and an atmosphere of safety and security in environments dedicated to children's play'. In *Playwork: Theory and Practice* (Brown, 2003b, p. 4), I suggested that one of the essential concerns of playwork is 'enabling children to pursue their own play agenda'. Thus playwork is about empowering children in their play, yet at the same time ensuring they come to no harm. The potential contradiction here is all too apparent, and has been taxing playworkers for the last 50 years. How is it possible for an adult to provide safe and secure provision that still offers children the complete freedom to explore their own ideas, feelings, skills and abilities? Wendy Russell's BRAWGS<sup>1</sup> continuum is an attempt to address that apparent contradiction.

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➔ Can you draw parallels with the arguments provided in Chapters 7 and 11?

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Russell (2008) suggests that play provision has often been characterised as following one of two models: the **didactic** approach or the ludocentric approach. The didactic approach focuses on child development, and sees the adult's role as one of structuring and directing children in order to help them become successful adults. The ludocentric approach sees play as having value for its own sake, and views the adult's role as one of supporting, enabling and empowering children in order to help them become successful children. However, Russell says this is an oversimplification of the two positions, which fails to take account of the complexity of play settings, and the need for playworkers to develop a range of responses to children's playing.

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#### **Didactic**

Intending to instruct; describes an activity undertaken for the specific purpose of teaching.

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Russell credits Arthur Battram with helping her come to an understanding that this dualistic perspective is erroneous. Instead, Battram suggests that the ludocentric principle should be about working towards a middle zone, somewhere between the edge of order and the edge of chaos. As a result, Russell developed a model of a **continuum**, from the didactic (directing and teaching) at one end to the chaotic (negligent and egocentric) at the other end. A typical didactic setting would be characterised by an adult-designed, highly structured programme of activities, with a rigid set of rules, and so on. The chaotic approach might be typified by unreliable staff, unpredictable opening hours, and resources that are dangerous or

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<sup>1</sup> BRAWGS is an anagram of the initials of the three people involved in the development of this idea: Wendy Russell, Arthur Battram and Gordon Sturrock.



falling apart. In between these two extremes we find the ludocentric approach, which is about children's play, rather than any other adult agenda.

<sidenote>

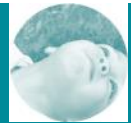
### Continuum

A chain, sequence or progression of events/areas where one thing leads logically to another.

</sidenote>

The model has been further developed, after discussions with Gordon Sturrock, who pointed out the need to take account of emotions and feelings, rather than focus simply on behaviour. This is an attempt to address problems of adulterating intervention, such as adults joining children's playful competitions with the sole intention of winning; or dominating discussions with children about sensitive matters, as a result of a failure to come to terms with their own 'unplayed-out material' (Sturrock and Else, 1998). The important thing here is for playworkers to match their feelings to their behaviours. By seeking to become more aware of where our practice lies on the continuum, it should become easier to adopt a position that is consciously ludocentric.

## IDEAS IN ACTION



### Practitioner observations

Two examples illustrate these points. The first I have used elsewhere (Brown, 2003a, pp. 61–2), but it bears repeating, as it offers an excellent example of the shortcomings of a didactic approach to playwork. It concerns an incident I once witnessed where a 'playworker' had organised a game of football for about 20 children. During the game, a dog chased a second ball on to the pitch. Quite spontaneously the children incorporated that ball into their play, and a very complex, almost three-dimensional game resulted. The adult blew his whistle forcefully, and stopped the game. The children moaned loudly, while he carried the spare ball to the touchline. Their body language should have sent a message to the whistle-blower, but he seemed completely unaware of their very obvious 'play cues' (Sturrock and Else, 1998). Not surprisingly, during the next 10 minutes the players became more aggressive, even to the extent of a fight breaking out. After a while, four of the children simply walked away, and the game broke up in disarray.

The second example concerns an especially chaotic situation that occurred at an adventure playground. Almost overnight, through no fault of its own, the management committee lost its funding. In the short term this meant that the playworkers were made redundant, and the site closed. Over the next few months the playground committee made sterling efforts to raise the funds to reopen the site. On a number of occasions hopes were raised, only to be dashed, but in the meantime false impressions had been given to the children. Eventually, small amounts of money were allocated to the project, with the result that it became possible to open for two or three nights per week. However, it was never predictable on which nights the playground would be open, because it was difficult to get reliable staff. Not surprisingly throughout this whole, long saga the behaviour of the children deteriorated badly, and eventually violence became the norm.

### COMMENT

In the first example the sports coach's didactic approach was ill suited to the playscheme environment. Having tasted the thrill of creative play, the inflexibility of organised sport was too much for the children to bear. A simple understanding of the compound flexibility process, and the importance of working to the child's agenda, could have saved that playworker a great deal of stress, and made the experience that much more enjoyable for everyone.

In the second example, a stable group of children who were used to playworkers who adopted a predictably ludocentric approach was thrown into chaos by a chronic adulteration of their play environment. The fact that this was outside the control of a well-meaning management committee is largely irrelevant. The children did not want their playground to close, and when it reopened they wanted it to be open at reliable times, with playworkers who showed commitment to their work. Since none of this happened, it is hardly surprising that there was a build-up of resentment, and a general lack of trust.

#### POST SCRIPT

After several years of struggling to keep the project running on meagre budgets, the management group finally received substantial funding from a central government programme, with the result that it is now running smoothly again.

#### STOP AND REFLECT

*In what ways might you ensure that the children's wishes are given primacy in your setting? How could you be sure that a playwork ethos is adopted at all times?*

#### Play deprivation and therapeutic playwork

The ideas of Bob Hughes regarding recapitulation, and the evolutionary benefits of play and playwork, have been explored in **Chapter 1**. This subsection concentrates instead on Hughes's study of the effects of play deprivation and play bias, and especially on the lessons to be drawn from his award-winning<sup>2</sup> study of children's play in urban Belfast during the period of the 'Troubles'.

Hughes (2002) has identified 16 distinct play types, which he says all children need to experience. His thesis is based on the idea that a lack of balance, or a deficit of one or more of these play types, during childhood will do lasting damage to the developing child. He suggests that this might take two distinct forms, either play deprivation or play bias. Hughes (2003, p. 68) says that *play deprivation* is the result of either 'a chronic lack of sensory interaction with the world', or 'a neurotic, erratic interaction'. *Play bias* refers to 'a loading of play in one area of experience or another, having the effect of excluding the child from some parts of the total play experience'. Hughes suggests that chronic deprivation and bias in children's play may be far more widespread than society acknowledges. This may be the result of various factors, including fear of traffic, perceived stranger danger, parental fears of children engaging in risky activity, and so on.

On the basis of interviews conducted with subjects who grew up during the period of the 'Troubles', Hughes concluded that play had been 'adulterated'. Adulteration is the term Hughes (2000, p. 13) uses to describe the 'negative impact of adults on children's play'. He found four main effects on play:

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Hughes was awarded the Mike Taylor Memorial Prize for Originality and Innovation in Professional Scholarship.



- deprivation and substitution of play types;
- saturation by adulterating images and events;
- range, choice and mastery deprivation;
- traumatic violation of the play process.

Hughes suggests four damaging outcomes from all this:

- The adulteration of social play fostered the continued propagation of sectarianism.
- The militaristic nature of the child's environmental experience encouraged the adoption of an extremely limited range of play narratives.
- Restrictions on children's range of behaviour created mental mapping deficits.
- The stress, trauma and play deprivation of everyday life resulted in neurochemical and neurophysiological mutation of the brain.

Hughes (2000, p. 58) refers to work by Harlow and Suomi (1971) and Einon *et al.* (1978) in suggesting that 'symptoms from play deprivation in other species can be significantly reduced when the subjects are given the opportunity to play again'. He therefore proposes a role for playworkers in alleviating the ill effects of play deprivation, but suggests that they would need specialist training in the effects of conflict on play.

## IDEAS IN ACTION



### Observations from a Romanian paediatric hospital

Studies of abandoned children in Romania by Sophie Webb and myself (Brown and Webb, 2005) have provided some confirmation of the conclusions of Harlow, and thus offer support for the recommendations of Hughes. Our work investigated the impact of a therapeutic playwork project on a group of children in a Romanian paediatric hospital. The children, who were between 18 months and 12 years old, had been abandoned at birth, and subsequently received little positive input into their lives. They spent most of their time tied in the same cot, in the same hospital ward. They were fed no more than once a day, and their nappies were rarely changed. Some of the children were HIV positive, and yet, when sick, they were treated with shared needles.

In 1999 the White Rose Initiative (WRI), a Leeds-based charity, employed the first Romanian play-worker (Edit Bus) to work with the children. This was a direct result of the newly appointed hospital director's awareness of Harlow's (1965) research into the effects of play deprivation in monkeys reared in isolation. WRI brought Edit Bus to Leeds Metropolitan University (now Leeds Beckett University), where we designed a specially focused training course for her, consisting of work at the Leeds General Infirmary and Ebor Gardens Nursery, coupled with daily reflective tutorials. Edit returned to Romania in October 1999, and began working exclusively with the children in a rudimentary playroom provided by the hospital.

At the start of every day Edit had to untie the children, feed them, bathe them and change their nappies, before taking them to the playroom, where she (play)worked with them during the day before returning them to their cots in the evening. As soon as she left the hospital, the nurses would enter the ward and tie the children up again. Apart from the therapeutic playwork project, during the first year little else changed in the children's lives. They still spent the rest of their day, and most weekends, tied in the same cots, experiencing hardly any interaction with anyone else.

## COMMENT

During the first year of the project two researchers from Leeds Metropolitan University spent more than 500 hours working at the hospital. We used a combination of research methods to identify developmental changes in the children, such as research diaries, participant and non-participant observation, and our own play development assessment tool. In some cases the changes were dramatic, providing strong evidence of the power of play as a therapeutic and developmental agent. The children showed a speed of ‘recovery’ that was quite unexpected, and which casts doubt on the ‘ages and stages’ view of play development, as seen in the work of Piaget, Parten, Sheridan and others (Brown and Webb, 2003).

The following extracts from Sophie Webb’s research diary illustrate the change from October 1999:

*8 March 2000:* Virgil plays well with other children, and is usually the instigator in made-up games, although when he plays on his own he is more serious. He’s always busy collecting objects and putting them in the yellow box; he’ll move the box around and then empty whatever is inside. This is repeated so many times, and he never gets tired of it. He likes to be in control, but is learning to share his ‘work’ with the others, and is definitely gaining in confidence. It struck me how much enjoyment he got from the building blocks, and it was so lovely to watch him laughing and laughing to himself when he knocked them over.

*29 March 2000:* Olympia was dancing to the music on the radio this morning with Virgil. They were holding hands and moving around the room. When I joined in, Carol came over and wanted to be involved, and this progressed into running up and down the room with them still holding hands and wanting to stay linked together. This might appear to be something very normal, but considering how unsteady these children were only six weeks ago, it’s a major achievement.

NB. Chapter 11 of my recent book (Brown 2014) is devoted to extracts from Webb’s reflective diary.”

## Summary and review

Children’s play is a complex phenomenon, with implications far beyond childhood. This chapter set out to explore the following questions:

- What do theories of playwork and the ideas of Brian Sutton-Smith tell us about the nature and purpose of playwork?
- What are the implications for playwork practice?

As we have seen, Sutton-Smith (2008) offers the proposition that play may well represent the mutant gene that enabled us to develop along a different path from the reptiles in the course of evolution. Burghardt (2005) suggests that reptile behaviour patterns are essentially reflexive. Most other sentient beings are reflective to a greater or lesser extent. Human beings appear to be the most reflective of all, and Sutton-Smith feels that ability is developed through play. Thus he is placing play right at the heart of the evolutionary process. The paradoxical nature of human play, and its inherent complexity, set us apart from all other species.

We are also the species that takes most risks with our personal future. Again, Sutton-Smith suggests that this characteristic has helped cement our place in the evolutionary process. Risk takers are not always popular, but they move the species forward. Playworkers generally view risk as an essential part of play, and have a belief that children are broadly

capable of making their own risk assessments. Thus playwork settings tend to be risky settings: not just in the physical sense, but also in the social and emotional sense. This means that playworkers are often working at the edge of what others in society would find acceptable. They are likely to be more tolerant of the extremes of behaviour than most adults. That is why Battram talks about playwork being ‘on the edge of recalcitrance’, as opposed to merely steering a gentle path between the didactic and the chaotic.

But what is playwork really about? From my own theorising about compound flexibility (see **Chapter 1**), through Sturrock and Else (1998) exploring the play cycle, and on to Hughes’s work on play deprivation, we can see that playwork is essentially compensatory. Playworkers assess what is lacking in the child’s play environment, and attempt to address those play deficits.

This work has generally been undervalued by governments. However, in the early part of this century there was brief cause for optimism, culminating in the Children’s Plan (DCSF 2007c) and the Play Strategy (DCSF 2008). Sadly, that enlightened approach was short-lived, and in 2010 the new government scrapped the play strategy; playwork has subsequently suffered disproportionately from the impact of cuts in public sector funding.



## TRANSFORMING THINKING AND PRACTICE: OVER TO YOU!

The playwork profession has never really managed to develop a cohesive or sustained lobby, with the result that most playwork provision is poorly funded. That funding is often short term in nature. As a result, provision is patchy, and the political base is weak. Like most infant professions, playwork has sadly been plagued by inter- and intra-professional conflicts. That has affected the profession’s ability to develop effective networks. All this leads to insecurity among playworkers, and results in their adopting a somewhat defensive approach to other professions.

## ? QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Playwork is still a fledgling profession, and there are many unresolved issues facing the profession today:

- To what extent, and for what reasons, is supervision acceptable?
- Is it ever acceptable to structure children’s play for them?
- Which is the best funding regime: public or independent?
- Should children and their families expect to pay an entry fee?
- Does payment always remove the potential for free-play opportunities?
- What are the pros and cons of open access provision when compared with care provision?
- Where do we draw the line between safety/danger on the one hand, and risk/challenge on the other?
- To what extent is it possible for this work to be done by volunteers?



## IDEAS FOR RESEARCH

The greatest need for the playwork profession is some form of longitudinal impact research. At present, playworkers are fond of swapping stories of their long-term success with children whom other institutions have found troublesome. However, this is generally anecdotal, unverifiable evidence. One of the very few pieces of research that focused on the impact of playwork was my own study with Sophie Webb of the impact of a therapeutic playwork

project on a group of abandoned children in a Romanian paediatric hospital. However, this focused on a very extreme situation. What is needed is similar longitudinal studies, but focusing on 'normal' children, so that playworkers will at last be able to point to meaningful research to back up their funding applications.

### Further reading

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